

# A Diachronic View of Pronominal Reference in English

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## Abstract

In this paper, we examine how the three pronouns *it*, *that* and *this* developed between the early modern period and the present period, through a diachronic analysis. We argue that the non-proximal demonstrative has come to be used for a more accessible referent. We also argue that the personal pronoun has been coming to specialize in an extremely highly accessible referent.

## 1 Introduction

As pointed out in the relevant literature, *it*, *that* and *this* in English appear to be similar to one another in their functions when they are used pronominally (see Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Quirk *et al.* 1985; among others). The following example by Quirk and others shows that they are even interchangeable in some contexts.

- (1) She hoped he would not mention her unfortunate marriage. It / That / This would be very COURteous of him. (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 1464)

In this paper, we are concerned with the three pronouns in (1). Before proceeding, it is necessary to define some important terms used in this paper. *Reference* is the function to mediate between a linguistic expression and its target, and *referring expressions* are linguistic forms whose main function is reference. The three pronouns are among them. They are used for *referents*, or mental representations of entities such as physical objects, events, propositions and so on in the speaker's and the addressee's minds. They point to *antecedents*, namely overt or covert linguistic forms in the

previous linguistic context. The antecedent represents the referent in many cases, but they may not coincide, as we will see later on. In (1), each of the three pronouns links itself and the referent, namely the proposition that the person who is called *he* will not mention the unfortunate marriage of the person who is called *she* in the speaker's and the addressee's minds, and the antecedent is the clause *he would not mention her unfortunate marriage* in the first sentence.

The notion accessibility, or the degree to which a referent is assumed to be available to the addressee at the time of reference (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Ariel, 1990), is widely considered to affect the choice among referring expressions on the part of the speaker (cf., Prince 1981, 1992; Givón, 1983; Chafe, 1987, 1994; Gundel *et al.* 1993; Lambrecht, 1994). In Azuma (2005, 2007a), we examined how the above three pronouns in present-day English were different from one another in terms of the accessibility. On the basis of a synchronic analysis, we reached the following conclusion; of the three pronouns, the personal pronoun is the highest accessibility marker, followed by the non-proximal demonstrative pronoun, and the proximal demonstrative pronoun is the lowest accessibility marker. To explain this, we made a tentative proposal regarding the evolution of the non-proximal demonstrative. We proposed that it should have come to be used for a more accessible referent over time. In other words, it has come to be closer to the personal pronoun in its function. We attempted to account for this by referring to the fact that the personal pronoun was historically related to

a non-proximal demonstrative.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we study the above hypothesis through a diachronic analysis of the three pronouns in question. We examine how they evolved in their functions between the early modern age and the present age, through a comparison among them, focusing our attention on forms of their antecedents.

## 2 Methodology

As to data, approximately 1750 linguistic examples were collected from conversation in seventy different British drama texts. Publication years of the drama texts selected range from the late seventeenth century to the late twentieth century. Each century was divided into half-centuries, and regarding each of the seven half-centuries, ten texts from around the same period were chosen at random. Tokens of *it*, *that*, and *this* which have reference were collected from the very first 400 clauses in five out of the ten texts, and from the very last 400 clauses in the rest of the texts.

We excluded some instances of the above three pronouns, many of which are shown in (2). They include tokens of ambient *it*. They also include tokens of *it* in a cleft sentence, in a sentence with extraposition, in a conventional expression, and in *do it*. Instances of *that* as a substitute, tokens of *that* in *do that*, and instances of the three pronouns in their cataphoric uses were excluded as well.

- (2) a. What time is it now?  
b. Isn't it a shame that he lost the game?  
(Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 349)

<sup>1</sup> Through a cross-linguistic analysis, Greenberg (1985: 282) argued that "[...] the third person pronoun [...] [was] derived from distance demonstrative or an unmarked demonstrative which [was] used so widely that it include[d] distance deixis as one of its uses" (cf., Lyons, 1977: 647). Himmelmann (1996: 243) argued that a third person pronoun had developed from a non-proximal demonstrative in its "tracking use". An expression in its tracking use keeps track of a referent (typically a person or an object represented by a noun phrase) already mentioned in the current discourse.

- c. The old man's been this way since brother Frederic bought it [bought it = was killed]. (late 20th century, *Country*, p.50)  
d. The victim's own blood was of a different blood group from that [= the blood] found on the floor. (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 872)  
e. A: Rover is scratching the door.  
B: Yes, he always {does it / does that} when he wants attention. (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 876)  
f. Had he not recommended it, I would never have sought this booking. (late 20th century, *Pearl*, p.12)<sup>2</sup>

The tokens of *it* in (2a-c) were not dealt with in this study because people have different opinions as to how they should be dealt with. One may say that if the pronoun is in an expression denoting time or in a cleft sentence, it has purely syntactic functions and does not have reference. In fact it is called *dummy it* in the Government and Binding theory of grammar. Another may say that even if it does not appear to have reference, it still has reference, although its referent tends to be general and vague, as Bolinger (1977) observed.

Although a pronoun can be either stressed or unstressed, this distinction is not focused on in this study as it is difficult to judge whether it is stressed or not because of the nature of the source texts used for this study.

As stated above, in this study, forms of the antecedents to *it*, *that*, and *this* are focused on. Ariel (1990) argues that the more accessible the referent is, the less informative, the less rigid, and the more attenuated the referring expression is. According to her, informativity is the amount of lexical information the expression incorporates. Rigidity is the extent to which a unique referent can be picked out unambiguously. Attenuation is the degree to which the expression is phonologically weakened.

Azuma (2007b) argued that the degree of the accessibility of the referent is reflected in

<sup>2</sup> In this example, the referent and the antecedent do not coincide.

the form of the antecedent as well: The more accessible the referent is, the less informative, the less rigid and the more attenuated the antecedent is. If this is really the case, the accessibility hierarchy will be like the following, ranging from the most accessible antecedents to the least accessible antecedents.

Pronouns > Full Noun Phrases > Noun Clauses  
> Non-nominals

More Accessible ←	→ Less Accessible
Less Informative	More Informative
Less Rigid	More Rigid
Less Unattenuated	More Unattenuated

Figure 1. Forms of antecedents and informativity, rigidity and attenuation.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this research is to study the tentative hypothesis that the non-proximal demonstrative pronoun, not the proximal demonstrative pronoun, has come to be closer to the personal pronoun in its referent's degree of accessibility over time. By focusing our attention on the forms of the antecedents to the three pronouns, we examine how the pronouns have changed in their referents' degrees of accessibility over time.

All the antecedents to the three pronouns were classified into four groups: Pronouns, full noun phrases, noun clauses and non-nominals. Examples of pronoun antecedents are shown in (3). We included the tokens of *that* in (3d) and (3e) in this group. They are used for emphasis instead of *it*.

- (3) a. Ink. [...] I know I have got the button --- oh, here it is!  
Nat. Then I'll sew it on for you. (late 19th century, *Velvet and Lags*, p.41)
- b. Verrall. That's my hat. (Rises.)  
Herbert. I was about to place it on the rack in the hall, sir. Mr. Verrall may come in to breakfast at any moment. (early 20th century, *Eliza Comes to Stay*, p.13)
- c. Drink this, Christian, it will warm you. (late 19th century, *The Bell*, p.6)
- d. HORNBY You've been asleep.  
DEBORAH Oh, you keep saying that! What's wrong with that? Why shouldn't I have a long sleep for a

change? (late 20th century, *A Kind of Alaska*, p.14)

- e. Wouldn't it be easy to blow the place to smithereens?  
Regan, Lan., and Moran. Oh that's fine! that ud astonish them. (late 19th century, *Arrahnapogue*)

Examples of full noun phrase antecedents are shown in (4).

- (4) a. Lev. That riding whip has my name on it, and mustn't be left there (goes into cottage) (late 19th century, *East Lynne*, p.11)
- b. MAGGIE. Look at me, John, for the first time. What do you see?  
JOHN. I see a woman who has brought her husband low.  
MAGGIE. Only that? (early 20th century, *What Every Woman Knows*)
- c. But [he], without replying, first opened his cloak, and then unbuckled a girdle which he wore round his waist. This he threw upon the table, and we all heard the ringing sound of the gold it contained! (late 19th century, *The Bell*, p.8)

Noun clause antecedents consist of non-finite clauses such as the infinitival clause in (5a) and finite clauses such as the embedded clauses in (5b) and (5c).

- (5) a. CHRISTINA Why are we given life? In order to suffer --- to be stoic? If so, why the larch tree? Why you? I think! To what purpose? For to believe we're here because --- Or in order to --- why that's to accept the most malignan[t] or the unbelievably inept! (late 20th century, *Queen Christina*)
- b. When society punishes its apostates, it forgets there is a heaven, and the victims forget it too. (late 19th century, *Dora's Device*, p.8)
- c. Bald. [...] do you know, Sir, that in France once I palm'd this Identical person of mine for Quality upon my Friend Lewis? Do you know this, hah! (late 17th century, *A Plot and No Plot*, p.2)

Examples of non-nominal antecedents are

shown in (6). The non-nominal antecedents include a non-nominal clause, a sentence and larger discourse segments such as paragraphs. As shown in (6b), when the referent is the whole conversation or discussion, the non-nominal antecedent might not be easily specified. There are some interesting cases. In (6c), the meaning of *it* corresponds only to part of the meaning of its antecedent. *That* in (6d) is used for a speech act.

- (6) a. You have been asleep for a very long time. You are older, although you do not know that. (late 20th century, *Other Places*, p.7)
- b. Alexei. Let me ask you, if all of this [= what has been said] is true --- or indeed any of it --- why have you been following me all the time? (late 20th century, *Soft Target*, p.113)
- c. I won't be frivole if you don't like it, [...]. (late 19th century, *Meg's Diversion*, p.8) [*it* = that the speaker will be frivole]
- d. HOBSON Is your shop more important than my life?  
WILLIE That's a bit like asking if a pound of tea weighs heavier than a pound of lead. (early 20th century, *Hobson's Choice*)

### 3 Findings

Let's move to findings. Figure 2 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the three pronouns in linguistic reference. The personal pronoun is dominant throughout the period covered. The non-proximal demonstrative pronoun has been more frequent than the proximal demonstrative pronoun. There is a gradual decline of the personal pronoun and of the proximal demonstrative as well as a steady increase of the non-proximal demonstrative.

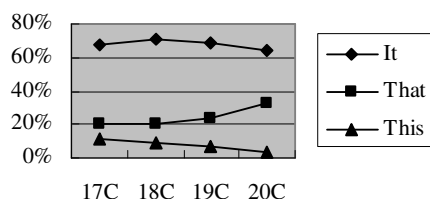


Figure 2. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns in linguistic reference.

Figure 3 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a pronoun antecedent. The personal pronoun is overwhelmingly dominant throughout the period covered. The non-proximal demonstrative has been extremely rare, and the proximal demonstrative has not been employed even once.

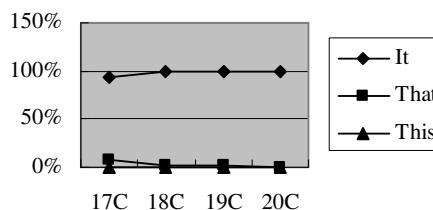


Figure 3. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a pronoun antecedent.

Figure 4 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a full noun phrase antecedent or a noun clause antecedent. The personal pronoun is dominant throughout the period covered. The non-proximal demonstrative has been more frequently used than the proximal demonstrative. The personal pronoun and the non-proximal demonstrative have been coming closer to each other, the former being gradually declining and the latter being slightly increasing.

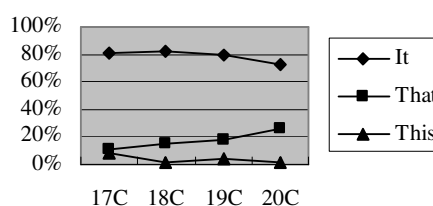


Figure 4. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a full noun phrase or a noun clause antecedent.

Almost the same can be said about Figure 5 which shows a change in the frequency of the use of the three pronouns that take a full noun phrase antecedent, but the disparity between the personal pronoun and the rest is larger here.

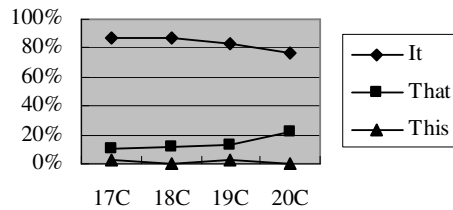


Figure 5. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a full noun phrase antecedent.

Figure 6 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a noun clause antecedent. Overall, the personal pronoun has been most frequently used, followed by the non-proximal demonstrative, and then by the proximal demonstrative. The personal pronoun has been relatively steady, while the non-proximal demonstrative went up relatively sharply between the seventeenth century and the nineteenth century. The proximal demonstrative was overtaken by the non-proximal demonstrative in the seventeenth century.

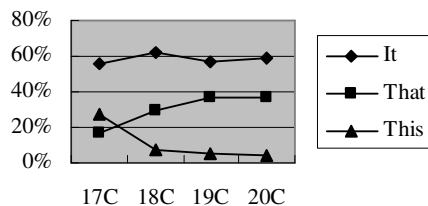


Figure 6. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a noun clause antecedent.

Figure 7 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a non-nominal antecedent. The personal pronoun and the non-proximal demonstrative pronoun have been more frequent than the proximal demonstrative pronoun. The personal pronoun was overtaken by the non-proximal demonstrative between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and there have been a steady decline of the former and a dramatic increase of the latter since then.

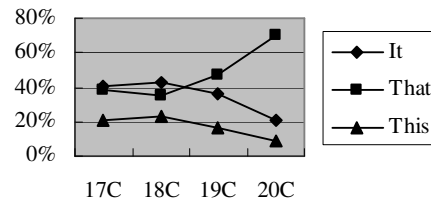


Figure 7. Change in the frequency of the use of the pronouns that take a non-nominal antecedent.

Figure 8 shows a change in the average length of the non-nominal antecedents to the personal pronoun and that of the non-nominal antecedents to the non-proximal demonstrative pronoun. We measured the length of each antecedent by counting the number of the clauses in it. The non-proximal demonstrative overtook the personal pronoun in the early nineteenth century.

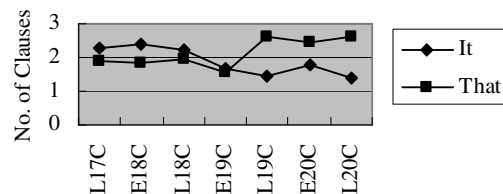


Figure 8. Change of the average length of non-nominal antecedents.

We have seen how the three pronouns have evolved in various environments. Now we'll look at the same data, paying more attention to differences among the forms of the antecedents to each pronoun. Figure 9 shows a change in the frequency of the use of the personal pronoun. Overall, it has become less frequently used. The magnitude of the change tends to be bigger in the context of an antecedent which is more informative, more rigid and less attenuated: It is biggest in the context of a non-nominal antecedent, which is followed by the context of a full noun phrase antecedent. It is smallest in the context of a noun clause antecedent or a pronoun antecedent.

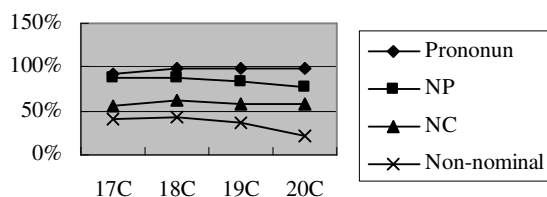


Figure 9. Change in the frequency of the use of *it*.

Let's move to *that*. Overall, the non-proximal demonstrative has become more frequently used. The magnitude of the change is bigger in the context of an antecedent which is more informative, more rigid and less attenuated: It is biggest in the context of a non-nominal antecedent, which is followed by the context of a noun clause antecedent, and then by the context of a full noun phrase antecedent.

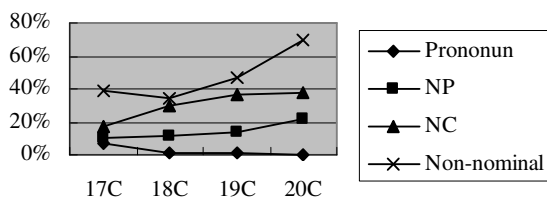


Figure 10. Change in the frequency of the use of *that*.

*This* has become less frequently used in all environments (pronouns and full noun phrases are not taken into consideration here, because there were few tokens of the proximal demonstrative taking these types of antecedent). The magnitude of the change is bigger in the context of an antecedent which is less informative, less rigid and more attenuated: It is biggest in the context of a noun clause antecedent, which is followed by the context of a non-nominal antecedent.

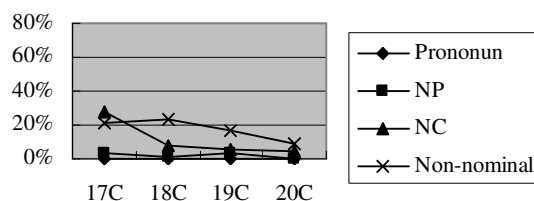


Figure 11. Change in the frequency of the use of *this*.

Let us summarize the findings that were made so far. The personal pronoun was frequently used in all environments, but has been replaced by the distal demonstrative in the context of non-nominal antecedents and has come to be less frequently used in the context of full noun phrase antecedents. The distal demonstrative was not predominant in any environments, but overtook the personal pronoun in the context of a non-nominal antecedent and has become more frequently used in the context of a noun clause antecedent and that of a full noun phrase antecedent. The proximal demonstrative was not frequently used in all environments, and has become even less frequently used.

The non-proximal demonstrative has become dominant in the context of an antecedent which tends to be informative, rigid and unattenuated and it has come to take an antecedent which tends to be less informative, less rigid and more attenuated. The personal pronoun has been coming to specialize in an antecedent which tends to be least informative, least rigid and most attenuated.

#### 4 Discussion

In this section, I discuss implications of the findings from the diachronic analysis. As stated above, the non-proximal demonstrative has become dominant in the context of an antecedent which tends to be informative, rigid and unattenuated and it has come to take an antecedent which tends to be less informative, less rigid and more attenuated. This can suggest that the non-proximal demonstrative has come to specialize in a referent with higher accessibility. The fact that *it* has been coming

to specialize in an antecedent which tends to be least informative, least rigid and most attenuated may suggest that it has been coming to specialize in a referent whose accessibility is extremely high. *This* seems to have evolved into a pronoun used for a referent with relatively low accessibility.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we examined how the three pronouns *it*, *that* and *this* have developed between the early modern period and the present period, through a diachronic analysis. We argued that the non-proximal demonstrative had come to be used for a more accessible referent. We also argued that the personal pronoun had been coming to specialize in an extremely highly accessible referent.

To put it another way, this seems to be the process by which the non-proximal demonstrative undergoing *grammaticalization* has become a higher accessibility marker. Hopper and Traugott (2003: 2) define it as “the steps whereby particular items become more grammatical through time”. It is often characterized by semantic fading, phonological reduction, decategorization (i.e., erasure of word boundaries), and so on. We have to examine the possibility that the non-proximal demonstrative pronoun has been grammaticalized in detail. We leave this for our future research.

## 6 Acknowledgements

This paper is based on my Ph.D thesis. My deepest gratitude must be expressed to my supervisor Bill Croft for his support and inspiration. Part of this paper was presented at the 3rd Late Modern English Conference in August 2007. I would like to express my gratitude to the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. All remaining inadequacies are my own.

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## Appendix

	It	That	This	Total
17C	126	38	21	185
18C	309	86	40	435
19C	333	116	35	484
20C	416	211	22	649
Total	1184	451	118	1753

Chi-square: 42.911, p-value: 1.2e-7.

Table 1: All linguistic uses.

	It	That	This	Total
17C	27	2	0	29
18C	70	1	0	71
19C	92	1	0	93
20C	195	1	0	196
Total	384	5	0	389

Chi-square: 8.165, p-value: 0.043

Table 2: Pronouns.

	It	That	This	Total
17C	70	10	7	87
18C	166	31	4	201
19C	179	39	8	226
20C	169	59	3	231
Total	584	139	22	745

Chi-square: 21.626, p-value: 0.001

Table 3: Full noun phrases and noun clauses.

## Data sources

Examples from the late seventeenth century to the early twentieth century were collected from *English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (1996-7, Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey) and Project Gutenberg.

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	It	That	This	Total
17C	60	7	2	69
18C	141	19	1	161
19C	159	26	6	191
20C	139	40	1	180
Total	499	92	10	601

Chi-square: 9.557, p-value: 0.023 (for *it* and *that*).

Table 4: Full noun phrases.

	It	That	This	Total
17C	10	3	5	18
18C	25	12	3	40
19C	20	13	2	35
20C	30	19	2	51
Total	85	47	12	144

Chi-square: 1.474, p-value: 0.688 (for *it* and *that*).

Table 5: Noun clauses.

	It	That	This	Total
17C	27[2]	26	14	67[2]
18C	66[7]	54	36	156[7]
19C	59[3]	76	27	162[3]
20C	45[7]	151	19	215[7]
Total	197[19]	307	96	600[19]

Numbers in brackets show examples that may be regarded as cases of inferential anaphora. They were not reflected in the corresponding figure 7. Chi-square: 54.34, p-value: 0.

Table 6: Non-nominals.

	It	That
L17C	2.26	1.88
E18C	2.41	1.81
L18C	2.23	1.96
E19C	1.64	1.55
L19C	1.45	2.63
E20C	1.79	2.47
L20C	1.38	2.59

Table 7: Length of non-nominal antecedents.